

The Ghosts of Omdurman

DANIEL P. BOLGER

There was even a feather-brained subaltern in Curzon's regiment who voluntarily, in his misguided enthusiasm, quitted the ranks of the Twenty-Second Lancers, the Duke of Suffolk's Own, to serve in the Royal Flying Corps. He actually had the infernal impudence to suggest to the senior major of his regiment, a man with ribbons on his breast, who had seen real fighting, and who had won the battle of Volkslaagte by a cavalry charge, that the time was at hand when aeroplane reconnaissance would usurp the last useful function which could be performed by cavalry. When Major Curzon, simply boiling with fury at this treachery, fell back on the sole argument which occurred to him at the moment, and accused him of assailing the honour of the regiment with all its glorious traditions, he declared lightheartedly that he would far sooner serve in an arm with only a future than in one with only a past, and that he had no intention whatever of saying anything to the discredit of a regiment which was cut to pieces at Waterloo because they did not know when to stop charging, and that Major Curzon's argument was a non sequitur anyway.

—from C. S. Forester, *The General* (1936)¹

The great battle for the Sudan was joined at last on 2 September 1898, on a nameless patch of hardpan desert four miles from an unimportant oasis called Omdurman. After months of flight, some 40,000 Dervishes finally turned to fight General Lord Horatio Kitchener's 26,000 British and British-led Egyptian troops. Soldiers on both sides well remembered the smashing Dervish triumphs over British colonial forces at El Obeid, El Teb, and especially at sad Khartoum, where the famous Charles "Chinese" Gordon had gone down so hard after a year-long siege. Nobody expected an easy fight.

Certain of victory, the undisciplined Dervish infantry drew up their ragged ranks before Kitchener's fortified camp. Their charismatic chieftain Abdullah, the self-proclaimed Mahdi of all Islam, elected to risk everything in one great stand-up engagement, a battle piece in the best European tradition. The winners would rule the upper Nile and the Sudan. The vanquished would be food for the vultures and jackals that prowled, hungry for carrion, just beyond the fringes of the armies.

Kitchener weighed the relative capabilities of his own forces against those of the Mahdi. He could not afford many casualties among his trained

Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.					
1. REPORT DATE 1991		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED 00-00-1991 to 00-00-1991	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE The Ghosts of Omdurman				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Army War College ,ATTN: Parameters,122 Forbes Avenue,Carlisle,PA,17013-5238				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT Same as Report (SAR)	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 12	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

regulars. The British public had already suffered its share of colonial disasters, especially against this grinning cutthroat, this pious destroyer of Christian armies, the charmed and pitiless Mahdi. Kitchener felt the pressure to spend munitions, not men.

He certainly had an edge in firepower. Though outnumbered, the allies made the most of contemporary technology, thanks to training with bolt action rifles, Maxim guns, and field artillery. The Mahdi's Dervishes had some similar weapons, but they really did not know how to use anything except their shoulder arms. They trusted in Allah, not in rifles.

The battle commenced early, under the blazing sun and cloudless blue vault of the desert sky. The Mahdi whipped his men into a suitable fervor, then launched them in successive, screaming waves at the entrenched allies. Muslim

The Army's force structure continues to be a hotly contentious issue. The Gulf War of 1990-91, featuring the spectacularly successful performance of our armored units, has lent added gravity to the question of how much we can afford to reduce the heavy force in favor of units adapted especially for low-intensity conflict. In the present article, Major Daniel P. Bolger argues spiritedly that in the sands of Iraq the great traditional armored sweep enjoyed its last hurrah. Many will doubtless disagree with Major Bolger's forthright views. His views are presented here, however, on the premise that the most enlightened policy can precipitate only from the most unflinching inquiry and debate. Those who disagree—or agree—are invited to respond. Parameters will air opinions in a future Commentary & Reply feature. As with all Parameters articles, the views expressed herein are those of the author and not necessarily those of any US government agency or institution.

—The Editors

soldiers surged forward in blue-black robed files, heads bowed slightly as if to ward off the lethal hail of explosives, bullets, shell fragments, skittering stone chips, and driving, needling dust. For their part, the stoic British regiments stood like flame-studded rocks in the tossing sea of Dervish assaults. Sweating British and Egyptian gunners loaded and fired shell after shell, battering and shattering Dervish attacks in mid-stride. Working the holes in the torn curtain of drifting gunsmoke, sharp-eyed British riflemen and 20 relentless Maxim machine-gun teams chewed strips out of the Mahdi's hapless infantry. The Dervish troops, eyes stinging from blowing dirt and spent gunpowder, stumbling and weaving through smoke and fire into the roaring hell-mouth of serried British rifles and belching cannons, returned a scattering of ineffective shots at their tormentors. If the Mahdi kept flinging his men across this fiery field, all would soon have

ample opportunity to martyr themselves for Allah, courtesy of Her Majesty's gruesomely efficient ordnance.²

Yet by standing up like Europeans, the Dervishes invited the British to indulge their own preconceptions of what constituted proper combat. The bullets and shells were more than doing the job, but what real Englishman could resist finishing off the day in the tradition of Lord Uxbridge and Lord Cardigan? Kitchener's cavalry knew what to do.

An observant cavalry subaltern named Winston Churchill recalled the mood: "Everyone expected that we were going to make a charge. That was the one idea that had been in all minds since we had started from Cairo. Of course there would be a charge. In those days, before the Boer War, British cavalry had been taught little else. Here was clearly the occasion for a charge." Churchill and the rest of the cavalymen waited impatiently during the series of infantry and artillery stands. The British riders enviously eyed the distant action, where uneven lines of Dervish infantrymen rallied after their failed assaults. Finally, the horse troops sallied forth to finish the day's slaughter with a strong dose of pounding hooves and cold steel.

"The trumpet sounded 'Right wheel into line,' and all the 16 troops swung round towards the blue-black riflemen," Churchill remembered. "Almost immediately," he continued, "the regiment broke into a gallop, and the 21st Lancers were committed to their first charge in war!"

Sweeping forward, gathering speed across the baked, crusty sand, the lancers closed on their foes, "the row of crouching blue figures firing frantically, wreathed in white smoke." The shining lances descended to level, reaching ahead of the thundering horses, probing for hostile vitals. Many of the Dervishes rose and jumped aside, dropping their weapons in panic. Some lowered their muzzles and backpedaled. Others cringed in horror, spellbound as the terrible horsemen closed in. Seeing enemy hesitation, scenting Dervish fear, the exultant British troopers applied a final clutch of spurs. The forces intermingled in a swirl of brown dust, white smoke, neighing horses, and screaming men.

Churchill and his fellows poked and parried their way through the milling, confused groundlings, working like "mounted policemen" sent to "break up a crowd." Pistols barked, lances jerked and struck home. In minutes,

Major Daniel P. Bolger, an infantryman, is currently assigned to the G3 section, 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault), Ft. Campbell, Kentucky. He is a graduate of The Citadel and holds an M.A. in Russian history and a Ph.D. in military history, both from the University of Chicago. He has commanded an infantry company, served in Korea as an infantry battalion S-3, and taught at the US Military Academy. He is the author of *Dragons at War: 2-34 Infantry in the Mojave* (1986), *Americans at War 1975-1986: An Era of Violent Peace* (1988), the novel *Feast of Bones* (1990), and Leavenworth Paper No. 19, *Scenes from an Unfinished War: Low Intensity Conflict in Korea, 1966-1969* (forthcoming).

it was over. The Dervishes broke. "I thought we were masters of the situation," Churchill said, "riding the enemy down, scattering them and killing them."³ So they were.

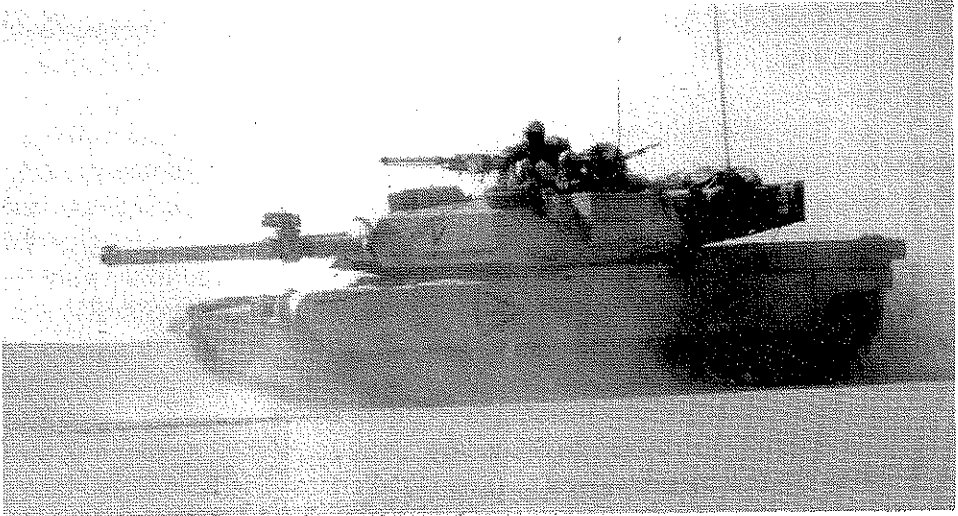
Thus ended the great fight at Omdurman, marked by one of the last effective horse cavalry charges in history. Kitchener received a peerage from Queen Victoria and the Mahdi's bleached, toothy skull as a souvenir. British soldiers, and the glory boys of the cavalry in particular, rested on their laurels. The Queen's regulars trusted that, to paraphrase their revered late icon the Duke of Wellington, Her Majesty's enemies would always come in the same old way and be dispatched in the same old way. But to borrow from an as yet unborn Bob Dylan, the times, as always, were a-changin'.

Britain's other enemies, the hard-bitten Boers, chose not to be Dervishes, or Kaffirs, or Ashanti, or Sikhs. From 1899 to 1902 they fought it their way on the South African plains, hills, and badlands. "The Boers," explained Kitchener, "are not like the Sudanese [Dervishes] who stood up to a fair fight. They are always running away on their little ponies." When overconfident British lancers charged in to follow them, patient, hidden Boer riflemen picked the heroes of Omdurman to pieces with well-aimed rapid fire.⁴

It would take concentration camps for enemy families, a wholesale purge of senior commanders, additional troops, and an overhaul of the British army's infantry, artillery, and cavalry to defeat the Boers. The methods of the Union Brigade at Waterloo and the Heavy Brigade at Balaklava had outlived their utility. Though British horse troops persisted into the Great War, Omdurman stood as their final flowering, an anachronism even as it occurred, and worse, an unfortunate encouragement to continue fighting the way the British desired instead of the way they should. The eventual corrective measures had to be lubricated by a generous application of British blood.

Well, that was then and this is now. What could American soldiers, well satisfied with their superb blitzkrieg through Kuwait and Iraq, possibly learn from Omdurman? Simply this—yesterday's solutions, no matter how dramatically executed, rarely address tomorrow's problems.

Just as Omdurman rang with the last stirrings of the Scots Greys' headlong dash at Waterloo, so the American Army's brilliantly successful Gulf War is a final echo of the Third Army's great wheel across France. The British soon found Boers out there as well as Dervishes, and Americans will shortly find Boers of their own to confront in El Salvador, the Philippines, or a dozen other hot, grimy flashpoints. Lancers did not overawe Afrikaners, nor will a US armored division much concern the New People's Army. To meet future challenges, America's Army must turn from the warm and well-deserved glow of its Persian Gulf victory and embrace, once more, the real business of regulars, the stinking gray shadow world of "savage wars of peace," as Rudyard Kipling



DOD Still Media Records Center

“The American Army’s brilliantly successful Gulf War is a final echo . . . Lancers did not overawe Afrikaaners, nor will a US armored division much concern the New People’s Army.”

called them. Giving up the wonderful desert triumph will be hard, and one need not be a professional soldier to grasp that. If civilians have heard anything about armies, it is that they are eternally preparing for the last war.

That is basically true, with one critical qualifier—the last *good* war. Like any conservative institution, armies tend to persist in things they appreciate, and to dismiss unpleasant interim experiences as aberrations. Thus the British at Omdurman were, in essence, the perfection of the stalwart “scum of the earth” who faced down Napoleon. Nasty interludes in the Crimea, in Zululand, and in Afghanistan were recalled, but they did not provide the core traditions and group mores. Though the British fought an unbroken series of colonial wars, they did so for the most part with a single-minded adherence to the tools that defeated Bonaparte—good infantry that could form square, bold if sometimes reckless cavalry, and just enough cannons to glue it all together. Whenever opponents proved stupid enough to fight on those terms, the British won handily. If not, they “muddled through.”

Just as Lord Uxbridge would have understood and approved of Churchill’s lancers at Omdurman, so General George S. Patton would have seen his own style in General H. Norman Schwarzkopf’s armored divisions as they pushed to the Euphrates. As Carl Builder rightly observed in his perceptive book *The Masks of War*, today’s US Army still draws its basic traditions from the 1944-45 campaign in northwest Europe.⁵ Good wars, wars that the US Army considers worth preparing for, are those that most closely resemble that great crusade. Thus, the struggle against Iraq found American soldiers ready. Korea fit the mold less closely, Vietnam just barely if that, and

a horde of Third World interventions and counterinsurgencies not at all. Even so, the mold did not, and does not, change.

There are other models, to be sure. If one accepts the current taxonomy of conflict—high, mid, and low (see the figure below, “The Spectrum of Conflict”)—it is theoretically possible for America to outfit its soldiers for all three types, any one variety, or a combination thereof. Since wars of unlimited aims and unlimited means promise to be short, brutish, and radioactive these days, ground forces really have no business in the high-intensity arena. Despite a short, miscarried fling with the Pentomic Army in the late 1950s, the US Army has never seriously prepared for a nuclear battlefield.

Given that political pressures and the ghoulish effectiveness of nuclear technology effectively limit soldiers to the mid and low range, one should not be surprised to see that the US Army has concentrated its efforts in these parts of the spectrum, albeit with a definite preference for the middling sort of wars, the ones most like the Army’s fondly remembered victories of World War II.

Low-intensity conflict receives its grudging due and no more. Lacking the allure of the victorious march through France, sticky counterinsurgencies and messy contingencies have been handed off to the light infantry and special operations forces, leaving the mainstream Army free to indulge in AirLand Battle in all its blazing spectacle. Historians might note that small wars have always been the business of US Army regulars, whether on the Western plains, in the Caribbean and Philippines, or in post-Vietnam expeditions. No real American soldier, though, could confuse a three-day jungle rescue foray with Operation Overlord.

The lure of a bigger war has a powerful fascination, especially for a huge standing force whose structure, ethos, and weaponry descend so directly from the liberators of Nazi Europe. They, not the Indian fighters, have shaped the modern US Army.

THE SPECTRUM OF CONFLICT

	LOW	MID	HIGH
ENDS:	Limited	Limited	Unlimited
MEANS:	Very Limited (no mobilization)	Limited (some mobilization)	Unlimited (full mobilization)
EXAMPLES:	Grenada (1983) Panama (1989)	Korea (1950-53) Arabia (1990-91)	WWII (1939-45) US vs. USSR(?)

REMINDERS:

1. Each side picks its own level. Iraq fought a high-intensity war against the US and its allies.
 2. Left alone, wars tend to escalate up the scale.
 3. In any type of war, if you are getting shot at it is a high-intensity war for you.
-

Today, the perfect American Army war is a mid-intensity conflict, preferably one unencumbered with the perils of nuclear escalation. AirLand Battle, the National Training Center, the vast majority of the school curriculums, most of the ground arsenal, and the 50-year-old focus on Europe have carefully honed US ground troops for just that type of fight.

Never mind that the country's mid-intensity wars in the five decades since 1945 have lasted three years (Korea), eight years (Vietnam), and a few months (the Gulf) respectively, but that only the most recent one really turned out as advertised by recalling the heroic days in northwest Europe. Forget about several dozen smaller wars, crises, and "incidents." The US Army refused to give up its favorite paradigm. It doggedly stuck to its guns and waited for a "real" war.

Saddam Hussein provided it. Yes, it took 46 years, but the US Army finally found an opponent willing (and stupid enough) to play the Hitlerian enemy part to the hilt. Those North Koreans, Chinese, and Vietnamese, not to mention sundry Syrians, Lebanese, Cambodians, Iranians, Dominicans, Panamanians, Cubans, Grenadans, and many others, simply missed their cues. "Damned unsporting," Lord Kitchener would say.

As capable as the US Army might have been in thrashing Iraq, it is high time for some sober-minded analysis of the Gulf War. Strategically, operationally, and tactically, this one was a museum piece—exciting, militarily impressive, and in the long run as sterile and unimportant as Omdurman.

On the strategic level, the Gulf War gave America and its sorely tried Army what they have longed for since 1945. It was a war of clear aims, well-defined means, and circumscribed duration, fought in happy concert with many allies. It was, in short, a great holy war of the type that stirs American souls to strong words and even stronger deeds.

Some think that this war for international justice might signal a new world order, some solid step toward global collective security. Woodrow Wilson and Franklin D. Roosevelt went to their graves waiting for that brave new world to dawn, and one gang-up fight against the neighborhood Mideast bully does not a united world make. It was a great crusade while it lasted, but every bender has its morning after, and every nation-state, big or little, has its own interests. Ask the Japanese and the Germans. Whatever the Gulf War was, it was not the end of bloody, unpleasant, and often necessary combat among countries, including the United States. Americans would be foolish to think otherwise.

It would be equally rash to assume that in future wars we will always be successful in organizing a combined forces umbrella. Many have remarked on the unique nature of the anti-Iraq alliance, and rightly so. If ever a war made strange bedfellows, this one truly stretched the political sheets out of shape. Despotic Syria and the ham-handed Soviets joined with democratic America; paranoid Israel found common cause with its avowed Arab enemies.

What could American soldiers, well satisfied with their superb blitzkrieg through Kuwait and Iraq, possibly learn from Omdurman? . . .

Simply this—yesterday's solutions, no matter how dramatically executed, rarely address tomorrow's problems.

With Saddam Hussein defanged, the disparate coalition members will drift apart. Only a few eternally hopeful idealists expect some sort of Arabian NATO to emerge from this shotgun marriage of battlefield convenience.

Superpowers are less dependent upon allies than other nations are, and sometimes must make war without them. Aside from exerting political pressure and enforcing the very helpful economic embargo, President George Bush's new-found allies proved pretty similar to old ones—willing to fight to the last American. America's willingness to go the distance made the difference. Once the United States of America launched its own jihad, would-be Islamic potentate Saddam Hussein was dead meat. A few more Bahraïns and Belgians on the bandwagon would have proven militarily insignificant.

The wholehearted nature of the US effort forms the other strategic oddity about the war against Iraq. This truly became a national effort, portrayed as a clear struggle between good and evil. President Bush sounded what T. R. Fehrenbach called "the angel's trumpet," "the clarion call," while reservists, patriots, Main Street USA, and even the skeptical press flocked to the colors.⁶ The great allied coalition assembled, composed "of free peoples." (What of Syria, or Saudi Arabia? As with the USSR in 1941, there were a few "stretchers" permitted in the interests of wartime solidarity.) Saddam Hussein played the Adolf Hitler role well, and if the Kuwaitis weren't quite the democratic French, well, one must make allowances for regional casting. The Iraqis erred grievously in standing up to an aroused, armed US populace leading an aroused, if less belligerent, global village.

In fact, Saddam Hussein's plight in the face of the Yellow Ribbon Avalanche offers a stark reminder to the sandbox Caesars who squat on unfortunate Third World peoples and presume to provoke America. As the Chinese discovered in Korea in 1951 and the Argentinians learned in the Falklands in 1982, it is not a good idea to invite Western powers (especially superpowers) to a rematch of World War II. Third World states do not win mid-intensity conflicts with determined Western powers.

Small state strongmen anxious to pull Uncle Sam's beard would do well to forget fighting fair. They should study their Mao Zedong and Ho Chi Minh and perfect the skills and patience of protracted struggle, propaganda, and terrorism. Those sorts of combat defy AirLand Battle doctrine and rarely spark countering crusades. All of that makes ugly work for regulars who had hoped and trained to refight World War II. It is no accident that General John R. Galvin, formerly Commander in Chief of US Southern Command, called these "uncomfortable wars."

Operationally, the Desert Storm ground campaign turned out to be a very comfortable war for the US Army. Expert professionals made the most of years of training, force modernization, and doctrinal development. The land operation will surely be studied for years, as it featured deception and maneuver enough for a hundred School of Advanced Military Studies seminars.

Yet, in the final accounting, so what? Like the cavalry charge at Om-durman, the ground action in Kuwait and Iraq turned out to be an intriguing but essentially meaningless sequel to a fight already won. The ground maneuvers that ended the Gulf War remind one of the Allied sweeps through Germany in the spring of 1945—deadly, impressive, swift, and somewhat redundant. These exploitation and pursuit operations, while executed to the highest standards, should not be oversold. They offer few conclusions about American operational prowess in mid-intensity warfare against a first-rate opponent and none whatsoever concerning US capabilities in the far more likely low-intensity struggles.

The war against the vaunted Iraqi army was not won primarily on the ground. Victory came in Foggy Bottom, out on the Gulf, and in the air. President Bush and Secretary of State James Baker fashioned a coalition embargo that choked off Iraq's spare parts supply months before the first US M1A1 Abrams tanks clanked across the border. The US Navy, in a thankless routine of boardings, enforced the sea blockade. Saddam Hussein's mechanized army literally fell apart from lack of proper preventive maintenance.

The massively intensive aerial interdiction campaign completed this process, adding the equivalent of several compound strokes and coronaries to already sclerotic Iraqi logistics arteries, and paralyzing the overloaded communications nerve system to boot. As the men at the bottom of the Empire State building said of King Kong, so American soldiers could say of their Iraqi foe: "It looks like the airplanes got him." Or as Specialist John Tosch of the 82d Airborne Division summed up "the Mother of All Battles," thanks to the warplanes, "the mother fled, the kids gave up, and the Allies played babysitter."

The limited land warfare that occurred offered nothing really new. Despite talk of operational innovations in the ground war, one can see a familiar and conservative pattern at work, one not much mentioned in AirLand Battle doctrine.⁸ American citizens do not tolerate high casualties, and so

American generals have learned ways to keep the friendly losses low. In this case, it involved waiting long enough to let spare parts deprivation and air interdiction rot out the hulk of Iraq's army. Then, and only then, came the ground blitzkrieg. It was Air, then Land, Battle.

The lengthy and comprehensive air interdiction campaign has clear antecedents in World War II, Korea, and Vietnam. During numerous pre-invasion bombardments, but most especially in the Operation Cobra breakout from Normandy, concentrated aerial bombing paved the way for American ground attacks. General Matthew B. Ridgway massed air and artillery fires, not his precious US regiments, to destroy entire Chinese armies in Korea in 1951. A brigade commander, later a lieutenant general, named Colonel Sidney B. Berry explained that in Vietnam, units maneuvered to fire, making contact and then killing with air attacks and shellfire.⁹

"Send a bullet, not a man," goes the US Army axiom. In the Gulf War, the American Army sent so many bullets, many of them "smart," that it hardly needed to send the men at all. What resulted appeared almost a caricature of decisive mid-intensity warfare, with the bulk of the enemy surrendering in droves prior to attack.

On the tactical level, given the unusual strategic setting of a coalition jihad and the opportunity to fight out only the exuberant end game of a mid-intensity ground war, it is not surprising that Gulf War methods turned out to be as unique as the conflict itself. For once, the press had it right. At the shooting level, America fought a war without infantry in the forefront (at least on the US side). Battles became races between hard-running war machines, clashing in sharp skirmishes at key crossroads. Similar pursuit operations, featuring few pursuer losses and horrendous costs to the pursued, typified the deeper thrusts in World War II.

Pursuit creates ideal conditions to unleash an army's heavy shock force, whether the 21st Lancers at Omdurman or the US VII Corps in Iraq. Yet in the exhilaration of the chase, it is easy to forget how long it has been since the American Army has seen such an event, as rare as a successful cavalry charge in the late 19th century.

Indeed, the last such chase came in the autumn of 1950, when Eighth Army ran wildly upcountry along the twisting roads of Korea, bypassing hundreds of thousands of waiting, hidden Chinese infantrymen. The happy playboys of occupied Japan looked great speeding by in their trucks, but they lacked steel when the Chinese peasant soldiers came out of the barren hills and out of the winter night, hungry for Yankee blood. Eighth Army turned tail and ran back south as fast as it had come north. There is a harsh lesson in that sorry tale, if anyone cares to remember.

The tactics of pursuit in Iraq emphasized today's heavy cavalry—armor—the combat arm that had contributed least to actual fighting by

American ground forces since 1945. In Iraq, though, the tankers' time had come at last. For a hundred unforgettable hours, the snorting, bucking, magnificent Abrams tanks held sway, spitting long-rod death, directed by confident men who could see through the night and smoke. This, truly, seemed to be the payoff for all those frustrating decades of deterrent duty in Europe while American riflemen saw the world's battlegrounds from helicopters, transport planes, and the front sides of sweat-stained rucksacks.

In this odd throwback of a war, the US Army's infantrymen played very little part. For most rifle troops, Desert Storm consisted of a long ride through the desert. "You keep moving, you keep preparing, you keep hearing about battles going on, but nothing happens," grouched 1st Cavalry infantry Sergeant Frank Knox. "We're going home with combat patches," said fellow 1st Cavalryman Specialist Edward Hawkins—"We don't deserve them." "All I did was see prisoners of war," remarked Captain Burt Thomson, a rifle company commander in the 82d Airborne Division.¹⁰ Desert Storm's ground combat belonged to the tankers, gunners, and attack pilots.

That sort of experience cannot bode well, because infantrymen are crucial to success in low-intensity warfare and usually in mid-intensity fighting as well.¹¹ They are humdrum, low-technology types, slow to move, and, if abused, liable to take a lot of casualties. Yet most wars cannot be won without them, because they do not take five months to get there, and only they can hold the mud spots for which men fight. The Gulf War was an exception, and the danger exists that, like the Israelis after their glittering victory in 1967, the US Army may restructure itself based upon a hundred hours of glory rather than over 200 years of hard, bloody lessons.

American riflemen and their leaders, pleased with our epic conquest, could start to believe that riding around in a Bradley Fighting Vehicle is what infantrymen do in wars. Infantrymen must be schooled to dismount and fight on the ground, not trundle along behind a long column of tanks. Like their Eighth Army ancestors, America's Gulf War mechanized riflemen may well be found wanting when the dismounted guerrillas come calling, as they surely will.

What then, can be taken from the US Army's campaign against Iraq? Surely, hard-working American warriors should enjoy the well-earned praise and adulation of their citizens and, for a change, most of the world. They met and crushed an enemy once regarded as among the best in the world. Leaders led, soldiers fought, supporters sustained, and things worked.

But having said that, America's proud regulars should put the Gulf War in its proper perspective. Strategically, America's role in the world has not changed much. The country's evident skills in conventional fighting can only encourage potential opponents to resort to those other, uncomfortable methods that so challenge American fighting forces. Operationally, this war belonged to

the diplomats, the sailors, and the aviators. Perhaps modern mid-intensity "conventional" war has become too horrible and costly to fight with ground troops, so it is just as well. Tactically, armored pursuits are exotic and exquisite things, but infantry legions on patrol are the stuff of superpower interventions.

During the Gulf War, US Marines evacuated civilians from war-torn Liberia, an unlucky American helicopter crew died at the hands of Salvadoran guerrillas, and the restive Philippines cauldron continued to boil.¹² Other low-intensity challenges await, sure to grow more insistent over time. They may turn out to be lethal to soldiers convinced now that they can do anything.

President Bush avowed that "the specter of Vietnam has been buried forever in the desert sands of the Arabian Peninsula."¹³ That sanguinary shade may well rise again, unless the US Army forsakes the seductive urge to keep refighting World War II. The ghosts of Omdurman, who know better now, would surely agree.

NOTES

1. C. S. Forester, *The General* (Annapolis, Md.: Nautical and Aviation Publishing Co. of America, 1936, rpt. 1982), p. 25.

2. R. Ernest Dupuy and Trevor N. Dupuy, *The Encyclopedia of Military History from 3500 B.C. to the Present*, 2d rev. ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1986), pp. 847-48.

3. Max Hastings, ed., *The Oxford Book of Military Anecdotes* (Oxford, Eng.: Oxford Univ. Press, 1985), pp. 304-08.

4. Thomas Pakenham, *The Boer War* (New York: Random House, 1979), p. 343. Kitchener's quotation comes from Hew Strachan, *European Armies and the Conduct of War* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1983), p. 84.

5. In Carl Builder, *The Masks of War* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 1988), this thesis is fully developed and related to the images held by the other American armed forces. Russell F. Weigley, *The American Way of War* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1977) traces the US Army's big-war fixation back to the Civil War.

6. T. R. Fehrenbach, *This Kind of War* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), p. 434. Fehrenbach's intensely personal and polemical history of the Korean War is, throughout, a plea for a solid professional military. Fehrenbach longs for "proud legions," ready to fight when ordered without waiting for the call to a popular jihad.

7. George Manes, "Some U.S. Troops Frustrated by Lack of Combat," *Pacific Stars and Stripes*, 5 March 1991, p. 7.

8. US Department of the Army, FM 100-5, *Operations* (Washington: GPO, May 1986), pp. 2-3, 6, 13, 25, 47, 55, 98-100, 110. The only oblique reference to the Desert Storm approach is the phrase "substituting massed fires for massed troops," on p. 13. Far more typical are these sorts of statements: "The high- and mid-intensity battlefields are likely to be chaotic, intense, and highly destructive" (p. 2); "Sustained combat, heavy casualties, and massive destruction of equipment will require commanders to rebuild units during operations" (p. 55); "The campaign should attempt to defeat the enemy in a single operation if possible" (p. 110).

9. Russell F. Weigley, *Eisenhower's Lieutenants* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1981), pp. 161-62; Roy E. Appleman, *Ridgway Duels for Korea* (College Station: Texas A & M Univ. Press, 1990), pp. 312, 324, 532-33; and Dave R. Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet* (Novato, Calif.: Presidio Press, 1978), pp. 144-46.

10. Manes, "Some U.S. Troops Frustrated by Lack of Combat."

11. Anthony H. Cordesman and Abraham R. Wagner, *The Lessons of Modern War: Volume III, The Afghan and Falklands Conflicts* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1990), pp. 373, 377-79.

12. Approximately 2000 US Marines and supporting US Navy fleet elements conducted Operation Sharp Edge. They evacuated 4000 civilians from embattled Liberia during the late summer of 1990. FMLN guerrillas in El Salvador executed two Americans who survived a helicopter crash in January 1991. US installations in the Philippines remained under increased security precautions following anti-American unrest and a series of threats and provocations by communist guerrillas.

13. President George Bush, "Address to the U.S. Armed Forces," 2 March 1991.